



Riach, A. and Moffat, A. (2017) Joan Eardley and the art of contrast. *National*, 2017, 03 Feb.

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Deposited on: 01 May 2018

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Joan Eardley

Alan Riach and Alexander Moffat

The current major exhibition “Joan Eardley: A Sense of Place” at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (Modern Two) in Edinburgh (running till May 21) is the most detailed and informative presentation of the work Eardley addressed to the two essential subjects or locations to which she devoted her creative life: the children and tenements of Townhead in Glasgow in the 1950s and, simultaneously, the north east coast fishing village of Catterline and the seascapes around it.

The contrasts are forceful: it is almost as if we are looking at two different artists. In the Catterline paintings, there are no children, hardly ever any people, and in Townhead, no sense of the landscape or cityscape as panorama, no sense of the horizon opening. In the Catterline paintings, natural energy occupies vast space; in the Glasgow ones, it occupies small living people in enclosed places.

Eardley came to Townhead as an observer, studying, sympathising with, and catching, in energy and line, aspects of what she saw, but in Catterline, she was much more an inhabitant, a resident. On the coast, she identified with the forces and energies as present tense. She’s an insider. This partly explains the differences made manifest in this exhibition. It’s helpful to begin with that sense of contrast or even dividedness, rather than the idolisation of the role of star-artist “celebrity”. Eardley was the exact opposite of the celebrity artist but unfortunately part of the publicity that seems to be required in the current climate overemphasises her iconic status. Let’s put that aside and look at the paintings.

In the present exhibition and reproduced in the catalogue, the maps of Glasgow showing exactly where her studios were and the locations of the streets and city co-ordinates, are helpful. The cartographic detail complements the depths of feeling at work in the paintings, and they help us see something about Glasgow at that time which previous Eardley exhibitions only suggested. It’s utterly shocking to be reminded that within fifty yards of the City Chambers in George Square, stretching up to the Cathedral, there was a huge slum area, bang in the city-centre.

With the maps of Catterline, we get a specific geographical sense of where she started working in an old Customs & Excise workhouse, and then of where she went, renting another cottage and then buying another one. We’re given an overview of the village

and more than that, a sense of what her perspectives were within it, from one place to another, moving through a fairly limited space and along quite narrow routes, and around a small piece of coastline, over about a quarter of a mile, but going up and down from hillcrest to seashore, from the fields opening out behind to the tightly-packed rows of buildings along the roads, to the bay below and the prospect of the tidal world out there, its “long, withdrawing roar” (in Matthew Arnold’s phrase) or inexorable rushing in.

In the 1930s, at the Glasgow School of Art, David Forrester Wilson was Head of Painting. According to David Donaldson, Forrester Wilson did not suffer fools gladly and was quick and severe to reprimand any sign of distraction from the serious business of painting. Donaldson said he himself was once hauled up to Forrester Wilson’s studio and told in hard terms how important it was to be disciplined, to learn, how to paint, and what it meant to be an artist. Nothing frivolous here. No circus. This was your vocation.

In the legacy of that, Eardley arrived from London in 1940 in her late teens. She entered an art world with its own dynamics and legacies. Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde had just graduated before the Second World War and were in the process of developing their quasi-cubist, Picasso-esque works while at almost exactly the same time, JD Fergusson returned from France to Glasgow in 1939. Polish-born artist Josef Herman arrived in Glasgow 1940, having studied in Brussels through the late 1930s. And again, David Donaldson pointed out that at that time, “We were looking to Brussels, not to Paris.” In other words, Paris was for aesthetes and fops, too much colour and too much light, when what was needed was a sense of the reality of the industries and coal-fields, working people, what conditions really were. The message was, “We know what working people do, and are, and we’re not confined to the salons and drawing rooms of the bourgeoisie!” Colquhoun and MacBryde’s “epic drabness” (the phrase comes from a Listener review by Wyndham Lewis) was perhaps the essence of this new aesthetic, emerging during the years of the Second World War in Glasgow, and it was this that Eardley walked into when she arrived. That was her milieu, from then on.

She was not alone. Edwin Muir, in *Scottish Journey* (1935), described a Scotland chillingly familiar when it was republished in 1979. TC Smout wrote an introduction to the new edition which ended like this: “The question which exercises the planners in relation to Glasgow (after several failed attempts) is still, in Muir’s words, ‘How is this collapsing city to be put on its feet again?’ The Scottish identity is still as Muir

described it, that of a lethargic and divided people, quick to resent a trifling insult but incapable of action to remedy their plight. What other conclusion is possible, when, given the chance to obtain a legislative assembly [in 1979] for the first time since 1707, 32 per cent of the electorate said yes, 30 per cent said no and 38 per cent did not trouble to vote at all. It is still a country of nationalists with no clear or noble social purposes, of a Labour party with no vision except the retention of power, of Conservatives who know exactly how to play on the people's fear of change, and of drinkers who wrap themselves 'in the safe cloak of alcohol'. Muir held up a mirror to the face of Scotland forty-five years ago. It is frightening to see so many recognisable features lingering in its glass."

The Glasgow Muir wrote about was not so distant from the city Eardley arrived in. Muir described it in horrifically vivid terms: "I have been told of slum courts so narrow that the refuse flung into them mounted and mounted in the course of years until it blocked all the house windows up to the second-top story and I have been given an idea of the stench rising from this rotting, half-liquid mass which I shall not reproduce here. I have been told of choked stair-head lavatories with the filth from them running down the stairs; of huge midnight migrations of rats from one block to another; and of bugs crawling down the windows of tram-cars. All these things, I have been assured, are true, and no doubt they are, but I shall not enter into a competition with the narrators of horrors of this kind for the appetite of moderately well-off and quite well-off people for these infamous morsels is one which has no connection with the sentiment of pity but is likely to check rather than induce it, creating disgust in its stead. Disgust is the coldest of human emotions, colder than hatred because more self-centred. If one hates the slums one may do something about them; but if one is filled with disgust of them there is nothing but to turn away."

Yet the world of Eardley's Townhead children in the 1950s was not Muir's 1930s squalid, lurid, stench-sated and rot-packed Glasgow; nor was it epically drab. Eardley fused her subjects – not so much the city itself as the children – with dynamite energy. The paintings fill you with neither disgust nor hate but wonder at their liveliness, the colour, edge and fizz of the kids themselves. Eardley's children command respect and encourage affection. Edwin Morgan's famous poem "To Joan Eardley" highlights the way in which the "living energy" in her painting and his writing, and originally in the living children, is present in life and can be imaged in art, a permanent assertion of human potential.

But there is a liability. The temptation to read these paintings only emotionally, or only romantically, is real. If individualism is a key facet of the Romantic movement, it applies here, beautifully: each child is strongly individuated. Collectively, they are a group but never depicted “en masse”. They are never mere statistics, but this comes at the expense of a collective sense of the economic deprivation of their lives.

As a centrally-located city artist, her subject matter, the children of the dilapidated tenements, came to her. She didn’t have to search it out. She is quoted in the exhibition catalogue, writing in a letter that it was “so easy to get the slum children to come up...” They were enjoying themselves acting as Eardley’s models, and she was enjoying her work, drawing and painting them, unstoppable, efflorescent, expressive. Her productivity was profligate. They were all having fun. In a BBC radio interview from 1963, she said: “They are completely uninhibited and they just behave as they would amongst themselves. They almost seem not to notice I’m there. The Samsons, they amuse me, they hardly notice me, they are full of what’s gone on today: who’s broken into what shop and who’s flung a pie in whose face – it just goes on and on.” She concludes “they are Glasgow – this richness that Glasgow has – I hope it will always have – a living thing, intense quality – you can’t ever know what you are going to do but as long as Glasgow has this I’ll always want to paint.”

Yet that didn’t blind her to the facts. In a letter to her mother from 1951, Eardley wrote: “...my work is among the towny things, particularly places like the tenements which are around my studio. I know that now much as I love the country and country things my work does lie in the slummy parts – unfortunately.” And her feelings about Glasgow were mixed. In a letter written in Catterline to Audrey Walker probably from 1957 she says: “I’ll try and not be too complainy, when I do eventually have to contend again with that nasty place Glasgow.”

Pause for a moment and give some thought to another artist, Hilda Goldwag (1912-2005), a Jewish refugee from Vienna who was painting Glasgow in the 1950s and 1960s, so exactly contemporary with Joan Eardley. It would be revealing and rewarding to exhibit their work together. Studying Goldwag’s paintings alongside Eardley’s is illuminating. Goldwag is clearly more deeply embedded in the European tradition and, coming from the city of Klimt, Schiele, Freud and Wittgenstein, as an outsider in Glasgow, she documents a city moving from the old to the new. As well as people, she paints buildings, townscapes as designs, old tenements giving way to the modern. Goldwag’s viewpoint is more objective than Eardley’s, and Eardley’s is more emotional and romantic. It’s remarkable that Glasgow inspired both of these women as

it did, and their work is complementary – this isn't a competition – but bringing them together highlights the contrasts between them and the limitations of each.

In an essay, “Modigliani’s Alphabet of Love”, John Berger reminds us of something essential here: “Only by considering a painting’s method, the practice of its transformation, can we be confident about the direction of its image, the direction of its image’s passage towards us and past us. Every painting comes from far away (many fail to reach us) yet we only receive a painting fully if we are looking in the direction from which it has come. This is why seeing a painting is so different from seeing an object.”

Pause on that as you enjoy the paintings. These children, this Glasgow, the art gallery in which we study the canvases, are a long way from the city itself in the 1950s. We need to negotiate that distance to get a true sense of Eardley’s value.

Eardley and Goldwag were both inspired by Glasgow, arrived in the city from different places and their work seems to go out in different directions, so our work, studying their paintings, means knowing their starting point. This isn't a critical diminishment but it helps explain why one is more modernist and the other more romantic.

And this is the crux of the matter. Eardley’s great strength arises from this limitation, if that’s the word: the limitation of a romantic vision. It sounds paradoxical, and it is, because if we’re noting a limitation here we’re also noting a potential power. Eardley’s romantic vision becomes an enormous strength when she’s faced with the right kind of challenge, standing on the shore, facing the vastness of the North Sea.

[Boxed off:]

Next week, Alan Riach and Alexander Moffat concentrate on Joan Eardley’s seascapes and Catterline paintings to bring the discussion of her work to its conclusion.